

THE AFTERMATH SERIES

A SYMPOSIUM OF REVIEWS OF MODERN CRITICAL
DISCUSSION OF BIBLICAL HISTORY AND DOCTRINE

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Number 10

**The Miraculous Birth of
Our Lord**

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By

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THE AFTERMATH SERIES

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NUMBER TEN.

THE MIRACULOUS BIRTH OF OUR LORD.

BY JOHN ALFRED FAULKNER, D.D., PROFESSOR OF CHURCH
HISTORY IN DREW THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

With Introduction by the Editor.

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X.

INTRODUCTION.

THE historical criticism of the New Testament, so far as any serious problems of dating and authorship are concerned, is a closed chapter. At the beginning of the present century two or three of the books of the canon were still, more or less, in the weighing; but these, at last, have won fairly and permanently in the contest. So far is this true that it is not probable that the question of the authenticity of any New Testament book ever again will become crucial.

Textual criticism, as it has affected the New Testament, has shared in the experience of the contest over historical questions. The crest of difficulty was long ago left behind. But the textual problems of the New Testament have never been complex; nor have they given rise to a great diversity of judgments. The path has been natural, if not always easy. With the gathering together, during the last century, of a mass of middle-century manuscripts, uncial and cursive, majuscule and minuscule, with the old Syriac and Latin, the Vaticanus, the Alexandrine, and the Sinaiticus (discovered by Tischendorf in 1844), scholars have had a complete working basis for recovering the original text. The results in such approved corrections and arrangements as those by Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tragelles, and Westcott and Hort, not to mention other distinguished workers in this field, inspire the belief that we have the Greek text in practically its original form and detail. One can readily see how immeasurably advantaged in this particular the New Testament is over the Old.

But reassuring as are the results in New Testament criticism, they do not describe a complete victory. While,

from whatever credal viewpoint moving, reputable scholarship has been forced to surrender to the historical and literary integrity of the New Testament; while the Book stands, and must continue to stand, validated in its entirety by all the canons of criticism; there is yet left out of the question considerations of inspiration, doctrinal inerrancy, and supernaturalism. The Book is indorsed as a writing within the letter of its own claim; but the field is left open for a new contest. The old critical onset becomes a scholastic attack, having as its objective the discounting of the letter and even the spirit of the cardinal doctrines of the gospel. This new form of the conflict is now on in full force. The battle cry is no longer the Canon, but the Confession. The supreme issue is not faith in the historic Man of Galilee, but in the superhuman Christ. The Life is not denied. It is admitted, wondered at, and, it may be, rejoiced in; but the Life plus its miraculous beginning is subtly dealt with, disparaged, and rejected. The ethical evangel is underwritten, extolled; but the overtopping insistence of the atoning sacrifice is reasoned into the sentimentality of a self-chosen martyrdom. The psychic resurgence of the Galilean Soul is made a tenet of faith; but the death and grave-conquering return of the Body through the Resurrection is denied. In a word, although the canon of the New Testament has won over all objection, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, and the Resurrection are not to be permitted to retain the place given them by revelation and history in the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

It is to be noted that, with the exception of a school of limited membership, the assailants of the elemental doctrines of Christianity have given up even the old and long-asserted theory of an interpolated record, the myth and tendency hypothesis, as also the charge of a self-deceived apostolic community, and have boldly undertaken to explain away the verity and majesty of "the word

spoken by angels" and believed on through a thousand ages. It is a contest to which the spirits of might are to be called until the consummation of victory.

It has been foreshadowed in the discussions that have gone before in this Series that the section allotted to the discussion of New Testament themes is not to take into general account any of the fought over and finished critical issues in either the historical or textual field; but that the whole space would be given to an answer to the attacks which have been made upon the cardinal and cognate doctrines of the gospel. The present state of thought in the Churches indicates the need for such concentrated discussion. The whole field of this special inquiry will be brought into effective review in the treatment of the three climacteric subjects announced, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, and the Resurrection.

The brochure of Dr. Faulkner which is being presented in this Introduction deals, in a calm, effective, and convincing manner, with the record and doctrine of the miraculous Birth of our Lord. This is the first and foremost doctrine of the New Testament. With our own view, expressed above, agrees the observation of Dr. Faulkner of the opportuneness of this discussion. A recrudescence of semi-Arianism and all but naked Unitarianism now manifesting itself has doubly emphasized the correctness of the observation. An age of haste and surface thinking, such as ours, is peculiarly exposed to the invasion of strong and insidious error. Only the terms of a heroic remedy can be successfully applied to such a condition. That remedy we are seeking to apply in these studies.

Was our Lord conceived by the Holy Ghost; was he Virgin born; was he the incarnate, eternal Son of God? Or was he the natural son of Joseph the Carpenter, who in some undescribed, and to us unthinkable, way became the Son of God? We hazard nothing when we say that the gospel, not only as a saving message for the spiritual

and bodily life of the world, but also as an enduring ethical teaching, must stand or fall on the answer made to these questions. Again, we hazard nothing in saying that the Virgin Birth is inseparable from any idea of an incarnation that could possibly bring into a personal human consciousness "all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." A racial Messiah, or even the founder of a universal cult, might be thinkable without the miracle of the Virgin Birth; but the Christ of redemption—never.

New converts and catechumens might be brought into saving relation with Christ, as were many of the early Church disciples, without detailed understanding of the theology of the Birth; but it becomes an intellectual axiom that a teaching and world-conquering confidence in the gospel is not possible without faith in, and knowledge of, the Virgin Birth and that which it validates and makes vital. In whatever treatment of this subject they may undertake, philosophy and science must accept this axiom as absolute. The miraculous Birth may be denied; the world, as a whole, may be brought to reject it, but without it the Christ of the prophecies and the evangel is inconceivable. But men who do deny the miraculous Birth conceive of Christ. Yes; but as pensioners, as parvenus, in the house of knowledge and faith built by others. A Christ out of the loins of Joseph is a hold-over memory, a mere phantasm of faith and thinking.

The gospel is both a statement and an experience of facts. The facts are not speculative or incidental, but fundamental, indispensable, eternal. The doctrine of the miraculous Birth is not a matter to be determined by the processes of the individual intellect; it is the attested, transmitted fact on which the gospel stands. As easily could cosmos exist without creation, sunlight without the sun, as the Evangel without the miraculous Birth. Unitarianism is to religious experience what the pulmctor is to an expiring human body. The pulmctor may prolong

mechanical breathing; but it can neither originate human life, nor perpetuate its phenomena. Unitarianism may stimulate certain ethical impulses and ideals which have the semblance of spiritual life; but it can neither create that life nor send it forward to a great evangelical end. The hybrid theology in the evangelical Churches of to-day which seeks a middle ground between Unitarianism and Nicene orthodoxy, in holding Godhood in the offspring of the Carpenter Joseph, has the abysm of infinite nonsense for its footing.

It becomes a serious question as to how far search may be made for the motive of the neo-Socinianism of our day, the party diversion against the traditional and orthodox doctrine of the miraculous Birth. It is not enough to say that it is wholly sinister, though that might approximate the fact. Nor can any logical ground be proposed that does not beg the question and bankrupt the argument. What then? Conviction forces the conclusion that the whole concept comes, at bottom, from a superficial spiritual apprehension and a personal and confluent compromise of the higher loyalties of discipleship. This is plain speech; but truth and frankness are interchangeable terms.

Just when the complete knowledge of the fact of the Virgin Birth came to the first disciples of the Lord is not now known; but it cannot be sanely doubted that had that faith and knowledge not come the gospel could not have crossed the boundaries of Palestine, and had never been heard of as the dominant spiritual force of the world. It was faith in the Virgin Birth that wrote the Apostles' Creed in its earliest norm, somewhere near 100 A.D.; that forged the tremendous phrases and enduring symbols of the Nicene Confession, created the Patristic literature, conquered both Jewish fanaticism and pagan indifference, climbed to power on the throne of the Cæsars, and drew on the destinies of the ages and millenniums to come.

It is not the single memory of the Babe in the cradle of Bethlehem, but the double memory of the Babe and his miraculous Birth that turns the soul of the world forever toward the Manger. It is not alone the agony of the garden, nor the orgy of the cross, that holds the faith of the world to the Crucified; but these linked with "God manifest in the flesh." God was behind and in the Birth; God was behind and in the Sacrifice. This is the testimony of Godhood itself. Who shall oppose to it the dictum of a groping biological obsession? Without the setting of the miraculous Birth, faith in the Incarnation must subtend the subtleties of a scholastic fancy; and the soul which seeks the Christ amid such vacuity must cry: "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him."

Dr. Faulkner has so analyzed and indexed the parts of his cogent discussion that the reader will not fail to follow him. The outline of his treatment covers the entirety of the subject; and not only presents the several issues in clear relief, but opens the way for the diligent student to fill in and complete the exhibit of proofs and relations. He best instructs his readers who leads them into independent and continuous processes with the matter of his writing. This character of exercise and self-direction is woefully wanting at the present time. Multitudes, even of those who possess the means of self-correction, are being blindly misled of a heresy of which they perceive little except the glamour of its intellectual enticement. This is at once the hope and the peril of this New Testament situation. Christianity is seeing repeated to-day the experiences of its old-time doctrinal aberrations. This is a process of history. It must needs be that offenses come; but the kingdom of truth and testimony proceeds along its appointed course, what time the critics rage and their broodlings imagine a vain thing.

The plea for tolerance and the right of individual think-

ing made by the chief offenders in the present heretical diversion in the Churches is both ill-timed and specious. Tolerance and thought license are terms with implied limitations. These limitations are determined by the subjects involved and their relation to the organizations which have undertaken to teach and promote them. Within these limitations, license and privilege cease, so far as regards community law. In an orthodox Church whose faith is determined by the Apostles' Creed and the teachings of the New Testament, a denial of the Virgin Birth leaves no ground for a plea in abatement of the obligations imposed by subscription. Antinomianism in every form and denial of the essential spirituality of the operative gospel have heretofore claimed toleration and hospitality in Church fellowship. History doubtless is preparing to repeat itself. The miraculous Birth is the container of the divine doctrines. It is not a question of toleration and private interpretation as to whether or not men in orthodox orders shall crush that container and toss it away at will. It is a question of the preservation of the truth.

I am aware that this line of discussion does not belong properly to a purely critical engagement; but it is so important an integer in the controversy now vexing the life of the Evangelical Churches that it would be a remissness not to bring it forward at this time. What is to be done? Just what we are seeking to do; what Dr. Faulkner has done in the following pages: earnestly contend for the truth once for all delivered to the saints. It is a modern occasion for invoking the rule of the parable of the tares and wheat. The wheat life of faith must go on in growth and seed-bearing, waiting for the natural and logical judgment of Spirit-directed time. We must give this heresy time to finish its course.

Dr. Faulkner scarcely needs introduction to readers of current theological literature in America. To Methodist

readers he is particularly well known. Many of his former pupils are in our denominational pulpits, North and South. Dr. Faulkner fills the Chair of Church History in Drew Theological Seminary. He made important contributions to the Church history edited by the late Bishop Hurst; and has written not a few other historical sketches and books on theological and kindred subjects, amongst which are "The Methodists," "Cyprian," and "Erasmus." We have long regarded him as one of the soundest and ablest scholars in America. We have particularly esteemed him to be fitted to discuss the preëminent doctrine of the Miraculous Birth of Our Lord.

THE MIRACULOUS BIRTH OF OUR LORD.

1. HOW THE CONTROVERSY AROSE.

WITH the exception of a portion of the Ebionites in the second century, of whom later, it was—speaking generally—the universal belief of the Christian Church from the beginning to modern times that our Lord Jesus Christ was born miraculously—that is, by the Holy Spirit without the aid of the father. Of course the German rationalists of the seventeenth century and the English Deists of the close of the seventeenth and of the eighteenth century rejected the Birth (to save space I shall use the word Birth with capital as synonymous with Miraculous or Virgin Birth), but they rejected other miracles as well, so that their denial was taken for granted. All who received Christianity as a divine religion and the Bible as a divine revelation took the Birth as a matter of course. But there came over into German Christianity an influence here that was disastrous. Kant the philosopher, who tried to lay a foundation for religion in the “practical” reason, really took away with one hand what he gave with the other, as he denied the supernatural and therefore the Christian religion. Schleiermacher, though an eminent Christian teacher, felt the rationalistic age-spirit (*Zeitgeist*), and declared against miracle, which he said destroyed the whole connection of nature¹ (though it does not). By these two Ritschl, without denying the possibility of miracle and occasionally speaking hopefully, was deeply touched, and so leaves the matter vague and “up in the air,”² and his school has bettered their master on the negative side. And therefore Schrempf, when he

¹Schleiermacher, “*Glaubenslehre*,” I., Sec. 47.

²Orr, “The Ritschian Theology,” 91-93.

went among them to get training in Tübingen, lost his early faith and was made ready for his later action. He became pastor at Leuzendorf in Württemberg. As such he had to baptize, and at that service the Church law compelled him to ask the godfathers or candidates this question: "Let us now take upon ourselves the confession of the holy faith: we believe in God the Father Almighty [and the rest of the Apostles' Creed]. Do you desire, then, to have this child baptized upon this faith, and upon the ground of the same Christianly and savingly trained?" But Schrempf's "liberal" education in theology had made even parts (Birth, bodily resurrection, etc.) of this modest creed impossible, and in 1891 he substituted this question: "Do you desire to have this child baptized unto our Saviour Jesus Christ, and Christianly and savingly trained in faith in him?" He publicly explained and defended his course. As this change was against the law of the State Church of Württemberg, the matter went into the ecclesiastical courts, and minister Schrempf in 1892 was thrown out of his pastorate.³

The village pastor found himself world-famous. Presses teemed with pamphlets on the Apostles' Creed. In the last half of 1892 forty or fifty treatises appeared on the subject in Germany, and as that country then set the theological pace these books and pamphlets were ordered by other countries and some even translated. His students asked the Ritschian historian Harnack to give a public judgment on the Creed, especially whether it should be made obligatory in acts of worship. In his reply he made special objection to "Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary," for here, he said, something is asserted which is unbelievable to many believing Christians, and no change of meaning of this

³*Die Christliche Welt*, August 18, 1892, 759 ff., also Schrempf's own pamphlet, "Akten zu meiner Entlassung," u.s.w., 1892 (56 pages).

clause such as other clauses have undergone can be allowed, because the only change here must be a change into its opposite. Here is a real embarrassment to every upright Christian who wishes to use the Creed and yet is not convinced of this clause.⁴ Harnack followed this with a pamphlet on the Creed itself, its history, etc.; and this, as I said, was the beginning of a mighty flood and the start (1892) of the modern discussions of the Birth of Jesus. And they have kept up to this hour.

2. IS THE QUESTION IMPORTANT?

It is a favorite position of many that while it is important to know who Jesus was, it is of no importance to know how he came to be. His words and works verify himself, but not his origin. Now it is true that Christianity grew and could only have grown by preaching Jesus as he was in adult life as Saviour and Lord, his words and his deeds. The question of his origin would not immediately arise. But it was bound to arise. The crucial thing in Christianity both among Jews and Gentiles was not God the Father—all religions were equally concerned with him—but was Jesus Christ. Who is he? Where did he come from? What did he do? Is he a prophet or is he the Son of God, who with the Father is to be praised and worshiped? Our religion hung on that. From the first he was looked upon as divine. I cannot stop to prove this now, but it is true.⁵ This brought up his origin. Notice, the story of his origin was not invented to prove him divine, because necessarily in a missionary age the historical Christ himself would be preached, and that Christ proved himself and was proved divine first, and thus he was received and men became

⁴ "In Sachen des Apostolikums," in *Christliche Welt*, 1892, 769.

⁵ See the appropriate chapters in Faulkner, "Modernism and the Christian Faith," 2d edition, 1922.

Christians. There was no necessity therefore for inventing his Birth to prove what was universally believed. But the facts as to his origin were bound to come out. By and by a more or less full systematic life of him would be written. It was written. It was found that the Birth fitted the Life and the Words and the End, and all fitted the already received doctrine. You could hardly imagine the contrary. But imagine it. It is discovered by our evangelists that Jesus, who is worshiped as Lord by every congregation established by the time the Gospels were written, was the offspring of the premature passion of a Galilean carpenter. Think of the disappointment, the chagrin, perhaps the rage, of thousands of disillusioned converts. "Who is this? We thought we were worshiping the Son of God, eternal Saviour and Lord, who came from the Father to save us. But we find in the thing which determines his being, that is, his origin, he is just like all the rest of us, a mere man. We have all been idolaters. Out with such a contemptible heathenism!" Yes, the question of his origin is important. Perhaps it is all-important.

This means also that the Birth was not brought in, as an eminent writer alleges,⁶ to explain the Person of Christ. It was told as it was found, naïvely and simply, as a fact. It was not presented in the New Testament as having doctrinal bearing, whether on Logos (the "Word"), the "Two Natures," or anything else. History has made us interested in these discussions, as the first witnesses were not and could not be. When the facts came out, they fitted the beliefs of the Church on Christ, but that was a coincidence, not an intention.

3. THE OLD TESTAMENT.

It was the constant preaching of Christ and the apostles that they were carrying out the principles of the Old

⁶S. Mathews, "The Gospel and the Modern Man," 1910.

Testament, that though they corrected imperfect parts of that earlier development they stood upon its platform and reproclaimed its truths. Messiah, salvation, justification by faith, regeneration, universality of the Gospel, God as Father—everything was in the old covenant; if not in fullness, yet in germ. But there was one exception—the non-paternal Birth. There were indeed cases of divine quickening where those barren or past age received power, and these might be considered foregleams of that one Birth for which all others were made; but they, after all, were with the coöperation of the father, and so not miraculous in the New Testament sense. Neither in the Old nor New Testament was there anything approaching asceticism, the thought of anything unworthy or unholy in the slightest degree in marriage, procreation, etc. Priests, prophets, apostles, were married; priests came in a line of descent; “blessed is the man whose quiver is full of” children (Ps. cxxvii. 5); even John the Baptist, though he was born through special answer to prayer when natural signs were unfavorable (Luke i. 7, 13) and was spiritually endowed before birth (verse 15), came as to origin in the natural way (verse 13). The nearest approach to the monastic principle in the New Testament is Christ’s words in Matthew xix. 12 and Paul’s advices in view of the “distress that is upon us” (1 Cor. vii. 26); and space will not allow discussion. It is indeed true that we have the famous passage in Isaiah vii. 14, which Matthew brings forward as corroborating the Birth and a prophecy of it (i. 22, 23). But it is universally agreed by scholars that the Hebrew word translated “virgin” means a young woman of marriageable age (the regular Hebrew word for “virgin” being another), so that we cannot build an exclusive reference on the Hebrew. The Septuagint (Greek) version of Isaiah had *parthenos*, “virgin,” and it was that which Matthew had in mind. We must remember also that Matthew looked upon the Old Testa-

ment as full of Christ, anticipating him at almost any turn; and that though he was justified in this use pedagogically, didactically, and religiously, and as a tribute to the far-reaching spiritual shadowings forth of that Testament, he was not always justified scientifically—that is, as to the immediate reference of the passage, especially in its original Hebrew text.⁷ Like many another truth, the New Testament climaxes the Old with a new glory also in the Birth.

4. THE WITNESS OF LUKE.

Critics are generally agreed that Luke's Gospel is fairly early: Blass, 55-60; Harnack, 78-93; others, 70-85. It is supposed to be composed of a Marcan document, Logia or Discourses, oral tradition, and special narratives like the infancy stories. It is written in a workmanlike way, in excellent Greek, so much so that Professor Hayes of Garrett Biblical Institute has published a little treatise on it under the title, "The Most Beautiful Book in the World" (1913). Its author was for that age a man of scientific training, and—not speaking of divine aid—took his task conscientiously. It was his deliberate purpose, he says, to trace matters accurately and to set them out in order (i. 3). Where means are left for checking up his statements scholars have found that his claim is well founded, even strikingly so. He says that in the sixth month Gabriel the angel was sent to Nazareth in Galilee to a virgin betrothed to Joseph of the house of David. He greeted her with, "Hail, thou endowed-with-grace one, the Lord (is) with thee." The salutation perplexed her. He immediately reassured her by telling her not to fear, as she had found grace with God, and added: "Thou shalt conceive in womb and shalt bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called

⁷See Thorburn, "Virgin Birth," pages 144-148, and the long and admirable comment of H. A. W. Meyer, on Matthew i. 22, 23.

the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob unto the ages, and of his kingdom there shall not be end." Mary did not falter with her reply: "How is this? for I know not a man." Gabriel again reassured her: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and power of Highest shall shadow thee over; therefore that Holy Thing to be born shall be called Son of God." Then he told of her relative Elisabeth's happy fate, the future mother of the forerunner John, and added, "Every saying from God shall not at all be powerless." Mary closed by saying, "Behold the slave of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy saying" (i. 26-38.)

That this was a proclamation of a miraculous (non-paternal) Birth has been—as far as I know—the opinion of critics of all schools, though in January, 1923, a theologian came out with the theory that the angel intended to announce only an ordinary birth, with special divine qualification of the mother.⁸ This is excluded by the frank confession of Mary in verse 34 and the equally frank reply to that confession in verse 35, with the additional facts that the child was to be holy and the Son of God, which to Jewish ears would mean much more than to ours. Radical critics get rid of the witness of Luke by alleging an interpolation of the verses. If there were good manuscript evidence of the omission, this would be welcome to all, for none of us is concerned to find in the New Testament unnecessary miracles, in which in fact God is an economist. And it is true that there is one Latin manuscript of the fourth or fifth century which omits verse 34 and substitutes a part of verse 38, but a reading which has all manuscripts except one, and that a second-rate one, is practically unanimous. But even so this Latin version still keeps verse 35, so that the super-

⁸Lewis, in *Methodist Review*, N. Y., January, 1923, page 117.

natural character of the narrative is witnessed with absolute unanimity. The probability is that the translator stumbled at Mary's question as arguing a want of faith on her part, and so omitted it. It is also true that the Protevangelium, a false Gospel of the second or third century, omits our verse 34, substituting a paraphrase with a different meaning; but this Gospel does not profess to be an accurate copy of a real Gospel, but its own story, and the omission is due either to carelessness or (more probably) to thinking verse 34 inconsistent with the childlike piety of Mary. The Acts of Thomas (second century) represent Jesus and Thomas as twin brothers, looking so much alike that even animals could not distinguish them; but this book was the invention of a heretical sect whose fantastic ideas no more invalidate the Birth than those of the Docetae do the Resurrection. These objections to the Lucan account, which radicals like F. C. Conybeare have seized hold of, are flimsy indeed over against the unanimous solidity of Luke's Greek text. It is open for us to say that Luke had no regard for truth, or lugged in false documents, but it is not open to receive his Gospel and then reject parts on subjective presuppositions, or on critical grounds that are worthless.

Though Luke was a Gentile of culture, all critics are agreed that his first and second chapters are bathed in a Jewish atmosphere, redolent of Jewish customs and phrases, echoing Old Testament passages, the sections worked in and bound together in a masterly way, and the whole set forth with a beauty, spiritual illumination, and almost splendor never surpassed. The question arises whether these sections (say those known in Church History from words occurring in their Latin translations as the Benedictus, i. 68-79, Magnificat, i. 46-55, Nunc Dimitis, ii. 29-32, as well as the Annunciation to Mary, i. 28, 30-33, 35-38, the Song of Elisabeth, i. 42-45, the Annunciation to Zacharias, i. 13-17) were composed by

Luke himself from materials he had received from Mary or her circle, or were Hebrew or Aramaic documents he had received from the same hands carried over into his own Greek. Von Harnack thinks they are due to the creative genius of Luke himself; but how could a Gentile catch without superfluous miracle the very temper, tone, living voice, and poetic inspiration of devout Jews of those earlier and Palestinian years? Sanday argues for Aramaic documents underlying these chapters, and I have been impressed by his points.⁹ Briggs, the eminent scholar of Union Theological Seminary, New York, discovered seven pieces of Hebrew poetry in these chapters and even their original meters—six trimeters, one pentameter—and that they are parts of two poems of the infancy current among the relatives of Jesus after his resurrection, one of which poems was used by Luke and the other by Matthew.¹⁰ Luke's story is "nothing more than a prose setting for the seven poetic pieces given to him," and were historical sources of the highest value. I doubt whether Luke i. 13-17 and Matthew i. 20, 21 are poetry, but I do not doubt that there is considerable truth in the theories of Sanday and Briggs.

It has also been pointed out that there are several female touches in these two Lucan chapters, little items of reality which only a woman would think of. Luke's historical sense and veracity sought out sources from that Mary circle, poems of praise which Mary herself wrote from her own memory perhaps, possibly not long after the events, and he incorporated these in his Gospel with the information handed down by Mary and her friends, some of whom were known by Paul and Luke. But the whole story is told by the latter with exquisite taste, with words full of sacred associations, and experts say that no part of his Gospel—not even the Parable of the Prodigal

⁹"Critical Questions," 1903.

¹⁰"New Light on the Life of Jesus," pages 162 ff.

Son—"is written with greater felicity of diction than the story of the Nativity."¹¹ Whatever the literary sources of the story, internal evidence shows that it was derived in the last resort from her who best knew its truth. The researches of critics whose independence is involved in their honesty and honor, like von Harnack, Ramsay, Chase (I do not mean to assert agreement in every detail), have abundantly confirmed Luke's trustworthiness, and there are neither logical nor historical reasons for withdrawing his first two chapters from the presumption which that fact brings with it.

5. THE WITNESS OF MATTHEW.

The Gospel of St. Matthew, written for Jewish Christians about A.D. 70, approaches the Birth from another angle. It says that Christ's mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, that before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Spirit, that Joseph, because a good man and not wishing to cause her any scandal, thought of quietly letting her go, that when pondering the matter an angelic manifestation in a dream assured him that he need have no fear of completing the engagement with a full marriage inasmuch as that which was begotten of her was of the Holy Spirit, that the child was to be a son, and that his name should be called Jesus (Joshua, "saviour"), because he should save his people from their sins. The evangelist adds that all this happens to fulfill Isaiah vii. 14, which he quotes in the Septuagint version. Then Joseph in due time takes Mary as his wife, but "knows her not" till she had brought forth a son, who was called Jesus (i. 18-25).

Here is evidently another story from Jewish Christian sources, which springs ultimately from Joseph himself,

¹¹"The Virgin Birth of Christ," in *Church Quarterly Review*, October, 1904, 196. Sanday thinks that through Joanna we have the link between Mary and Luke. See Luke viii. 3, xxiv. 10.

as that in Luke does from Mary, and both supplement without contradicting each other. I shall speak later of the readings of the Sinai Syriac manuscript. Suffice it to say now: (1) No one doubts that the first Gospel represents the Birth as miraculous. (2) Nor does any one doubt that the account is entirely independent of Luke's. Here two divergent and distinct traditions sustain each other as to the main fact. But independence does not mean contradiction. Lobstein's criticism here is too subjective.¹² The narratives spring from different traditions, one from the Mary circle, the other the Joseph, representing historical events in which each was interested, but these events supplement without opposing each other, show that each series meets and harmonizes in the central fact in which each is interested—viz., that the Birth is as divine as the Child, and thus without intending to do so lend one impression to what came to be the Gospel history of Jesus. In American history Bancroft approaches the Revolution along the political way, Schlesinger along the economic, so much so that you would almost think one author denied the causes of the other, but both unite in the chief fact which occupies them, the Revolution itself. Exactly so with Luke and Matthew as to the Birth.

I have already said that Matthew's use of Isaiah vii. 14 is not to be interpreted according to modern scientific principles, but by his general scheme of looking at the Old Testament as full of intimations of Messiah. Our knowledge that the direct reference may be something else does not invalidate his knowledge that a religious reference may be to the Christ. The mere fact of virginity was of no significance in Judaism, which had an altogether too healthy conception of human relations to become sponsor for the sickly asceticism of the third and later centuries of our era out of which sprang the mighty monastic

¹²Lobstein, "The Virgin Birth of Christ," 1903, 42.

development. For that reason the primitive Church would have taken for granted as the most natural thing in the world the ordinary paternity of Mary's later children and her having them as enhancing her honor. Far from it being true, therefore, that the "legend" of the Birth was suggested by Isaiah i. 14, Dalman says well that "no trace is to be found among the Jews of any Messianic application of Isaiah's words concerning the virgin's Son from which by any possibility—as some have maintained—the whole account of the Miraculous Birth of Jesus could have derived its origin."¹³ It is just as the historian Neander says that such a story could have arisen anywhere else easier than among the Jews. Matthew's witness comes therefore with all the greater historical cogency as to a tradition already thoroughly established in spite of an uncongenial atmosphere, and could avail itself of the prophetic foreshadowing of the Septuagint translation of Isaiah vii. 14, his very use of which implies the Birth as taken for granted.

Where did Matthew get his account? (I purposely leave out theories of inspiration or origin from above, and assume in the New Testament writers honesty only.) I think Gore's suggestion is as likely to be as true as any. Assuming that Joseph was a "just man" and that he died before our Lord entered his public ministry, it is to be further assumed that he would want to clear up the circumstances of the birth of Jesus and thus vindicate his wife's virginity. If the Birth was ever to be made public in its right relations, he must have thought his own testimony was needed. It is likely, therefore, that he left a document to this effect, which he gave to Mary, and which later was handed on through the Lord's "brothers" until finally it reached Matthew.¹⁴

¹³"The Words of Jesus," trans., 276.

¹⁴Gore, "Dissertations on Subjects Connected with the Incarnation," 1895, 28.

6. THE FAMOUS READING OF SINAITIC SYRIAC.

In 1892 Mrs. Lewis (widow of Rev. S. S. Lewis, Anglican) discovered and took photographs of an ancient Syriac text (translation) of our four Gospels at the monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai. In 1893 she and other experts went back to the convent and transcribed the whole manuscript, which she published with an English translation in 1894. This palimpsest (for over the Gospels had been written the lives of female saints) goes back to about 400, perhaps a few years earlier, but represents a Syriac text much older, perhaps 150-200. We cannot go into the interesting deviations of this version from the early Greek texts, but can only speak of its readings in our subject.¹⁵ It changes from the Greek in Matthew i. 16 so that it reads: "Jacob begat Joseph; *Joseph, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus*, who is called Christ" (variations in italic). Matthew i. 21: "For she shall bear *thee* a son." Matthew i. 25: "And he married his wife, and she bare *him* a son, and he called his name Jesus." Outside of these changes, however, the whole miraculous story as given in i. 18-25 is correctly reproduced in Syriac.

This is certainly interesting. What is the solution? Radical critics like F. C. Conybeare explain that it was the original text which denied the Birth, that that original text is correctly represented in these three translations as italicized above, and that the ordinary text has been tampered with for "orthodox" purposes. The only argument of any value he brings forward is that one manuscript of an ancient Latin version (*k*, cursive, fourth and fifth century) omits, "and he knew her not until." Will you stand a pyramid on its apex? All the original manuscripts of the Gospel, all the early versions, give the ordi-

¹⁵See the admirable article by Farrar in *Expositor*, London, 5th series, volume I., article i.

nary reading—only this Syriac version of about 400 has changed some of the readings, and a Latin version of about the same time has omitted another. This last may be due to the working of the ascetic principle, the translator or copyist thinking that there must be some mistake in the hint that Mary had other children by Joseph after her first-born and therefore thought he would “restore” the text to its original form. It is much more likely that the scribe of the Syriac Sinai text was an Adoptionist (one of an ancient sect who believed—at least some of them did—that Christ was the natural son of Joseph, that on account of his holiness, fidelity, etc., he was adopted as God’s Son, a form of which teaching has been revived by German “liberal” theologians of the nineteenth century and from them has gone widely among ministers in evangelical Churches), and had the boldness to tamper with his text in two or three instances, but did not have the face to carry his changes through consistently, and so allowed the bulk of the narrative to stand, to silently contradict his revisions. In this way a scribe in ascetic interest inserted “fasting” in Matthew xvii. 21, Mark ix. 29, 1 Corinthians vii. 5, Acts x. 30, but did not venture to change Matthew ix. 14, 15, Mark ii. 18, 19, Luke v. 33, and Colossians ii. 21-23. To make the whole section Adoptionist, we should have to “reduce it to shreds,” as J. Rendel Harris says. Even the Curetonian Syriac text has the ordinary reading in Matthew i. 16 and 25. We can remake our New Testament text against the practical unanimity of all original authorities, we can prefer a single reading due to the theological idiosyncrasy of a fourth or fifth century scribe, as do some of our radical critics, but let us confess that we do so from our presuppositions, and not from scientific criticism. We are free on account of the former to deny the Birth; we are not free on account of the latter to deny that the Gospels teach it.

7. NEW THEORY OF A NATURAL-SUPERNATURAL BIRTH.

To account for his retaining the supernatural story along with his own changes (as we consider them) in the natural interest, F. C. Conybeare has revived what he calls a Jewish view at the time of Christ which he discovered in the works of the Jewish Alexandrian philosopher and theologian, Philo. The theory is that a child may be begotten according to man as to its body and faculties of sense and according to God as to its soul and reason. He quotes Philo as saying that man is a being compounded of earthy substance and divine spirit. The Artist took clay and fashioned the body; the soul, however, he made directly. So Sarah became pregnant to God, though she brought forth to Abraham.¹⁶ Conybeare thinks that the sacred writer may have had the view that Jesus came naturally as to his body and lower mental faculties and supernaturally as to his spirit. I am sorry that such an ingenious theory is not better supported. For (1) Philo is advocating only the common theory of birth, called the Creationist as over against the Traducian, by which the soul of every man comes at first hand from the Creator, and of which echoes are voiced by modern poets as in the well-known words in the greatest single brief achievement in English literature since Milton, Wordsworth's "Ode to Immortality," and in Tennyson's

"A soul shall draw from out the vast,
And strike its being into bounds,"

and in his "Crossing the Bar,"

"When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home."

And (2) in the passages on Sarah, Leah, etc., Philo does

¹⁶F. C. Conybeare, in *Academy* (London), November 17, 1894, quoted in full by Thorburn, "Doctrine of the Virgin Birth," 10-13.

not mean to assert a double birth or deny the natural participation of the male, any more than Luke does in the case of the birth of John the Baptist. Indeed the growth of a legend of supernatural birth would not have been surprising in the latter case, and the fact that it never happened shows that the sacred writers did not invent unnecessary miracles. Besides Matthew i. 18-25 shows that Joseph had no more idea of such a birth as Conybeare has in mind than he had of the birth of Minerva from the head of Jupiter. Then, the apostles were Galileans, literalists, opposed to all Greek tendencies and Philonic speculations, of which they knew nothing. Whatever influence Philo had in Alexandria, he had none in Palestine, and anything like a miraculous conception of the Logos or Messiah was entirely foreign to him. Matthew tells a straightforward story with Jewish directness, a Birth mysterious and divine yet literally true.¹⁷

8. THE GENEALOGIES.

It was universally believed in the early Church that Christ was of the line of David, and it was not denied by his enemies (comp. Luke i. 32, Rom. i. 3, 2 Tim. ii. 8). The genealogies therefore did not have as their main function the proving of that fact, but the proving that Joseph, known to be of that line, was the legal husband of Mary and legally and socially fathered the Child whom his enemies had branded as illegitimate. The Matthew genealogy (i. 1-16) "meets that slander by giving a bird's-eye view of the movement of the history from Abraham to the Messiah in the form of a genealogy of Joseph, who in the light of all the facts concerning the origin of Jesus marries Mary and gives her the protection of his stainless name and royal lineage. The extraordinary boldness and brilliancy of this apologetic ought not to be overlooked.

¹⁷See remarks of Thorburn, 34-38. '

The formal charge that Jesus is the son of Mary, not of Joseph, is admitted—the slander involved being refuted by bringing Joseph forward as a witness for Mary. Nothing could have been more natural for a man fearless in the confidence of truth; nothing could have been more impossible for one insecure in his hold upon the facts”¹⁸—that is, not the minute correctness of the genealogical line as such, in which the author has no special interest and therefore artificially groups the lists, omits and includes, and brings in names of women and brothers, but the facts as to the *historical movement* of the genealogy as showing the origin, power, decay, and downfall of the house of David, and the facts of the Child’s Birth sponsored by Joseph.

The genealogy of Luke (iii. 23-38) is independent of Matthew’s, ascends the stream, and though ostensibly of Joseph, yet Godet shows strong reasons to believe it is also of Mary. Sweet, who has given expert attention to this matter both in his great book on the Birth and in his Encyclopedia article, thinks that the difficulties are removed and facts harmonized “by the simple supposition that Luke has given us the meeting-point of the lineage both of Joseph and Mary, who are akin. This explains the apparent choice of Joseph’s list, the peculiar position of his name in that list, the reversal of the order, the coincidences and discrepancies with respect to Matthew’s, the early tradition of Mary’s Davidic origin, the strange reference in the Talmud (Haggadha lxxvii. 4) to Mary as the daughter of Heli, the visit of Mary with Joseph to Bethlehem at the time of the registration, and the traditional discrepancy of ages between Joseph and Mary, such that (apparently) Joseph disappears from the scene before Jesus reaches maturity.”¹⁹

¹⁸L. M. Sweet, “Genealogy of Jesus Christ,” in “International Standard Bible Encyclopædia,” 1915, II, 1196-97.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1198.

As to the Birth, that is the very thing the Gospels bring in the genealogies for, and it will be a far distant day when the hope of yet-to-be-discovered manuscripts will gladden the hearts of critics by assuring them that our Matthew and Luke really taught the physical participation of Joseph and have been worked over in the supernatural interest. "An author who knew how to make even the dry material of a genealogy to its least detail contribute to the purpose of his thought concerning the slandered miracle of Messiah's birth cannot at the same time have taken over statements from a genealogy of Joseph or Jesus used by him which directly contradicted his conception of this fact. Any text in Matthew which contained such statements would be condemned in advance as one altered against the author's interest."²⁰ Even W. C. Allen, who started with the historically untenable view that the Sinai Syraic more nearly represents the original (for the nearest language to the apostles and first believers after Aramaic or Hebrew was not Syriac, but Greek, in which their first Gospels would naturally be written), came round to the conclusion of Zahn that the first Gospel from the beginning taught the Virgin Birth.²¹

9. JOSEPH'S SON.

Much is made of the fact that the genealogies are of Joseph, that Joseph is mentioned as a matter of course as Christ's father, which means, it is said, that he was his physical father. (This even deceived a young Methodist divine who hastily assumed that Luke taught the natural-paternal birth.²²) See, for instance, Luke ii. 33, 41, 43, 48; iii. 23, iv. 22; John i. 45, vi. 42. This mode of speaking is

²⁰Zahn, "Introduction to the New Testament," i. 567, quoted by Sweet, 119.

²¹W. C. Allen, *Commentary on Matthew*, chapter I., in "International Critical Commentary."

²²*Methodist Review*, N. Y., January, 1923, 117.

due to two facts: (1) The manner of the birth was not a thing to be proclaimed from the housetops. It was as fitting as it was psychologically inevitable—the parents being such as they were—that this holy and divine secret should live in their hearts alone, and should come out only at the fitting time and place. (2) Joseph assumed his place as the legal father of the Child, socially and technically guaranteeing his legitimacy, and therefore "went" everywhere as his father. Even if the public had known the facts, the Semitic mind would have considered this foster parentage as perfectly natural. Speaking of early Arabia, W. Robertson Smith says: "A man is father of all the children of the woman by whom he has purchased the right to her offspring, that shall be reckoned to be his own kin. . . . Ultimately if a child was born in the tribe of a woman brought in by contract of marriage, it was reckoned to be of the tribal stock as a matter of course without inquiry as to its natural procreator."²³ Mrs. A. S. Lewis well says that unless Jesus had passed as the son of Joseph, the latter could not gratify his wish not to expose Mary (Matt. i. 19), and the Jews could not have said, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matt. xiii. 55, Mark vi. 3). Mrs. Lewis further says that in her Syriac manuscript (fifth or sixth century) "*Protevangelium Jacobi*," written for the express purpose of glorifying the perpetual virginity of Mary, the angel says to Joseph, "She shall bear *to thee* a son," which shows again that language which to a Westerner would imply physical paternity did not necessarily to a Semite.²⁴ In any case the passages which mention "Joseph's son" are amply covered by the father's legal position, and do not invalidate the Birth.

²³W. R. Smith, "Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia," 1885 (2d edition, 1907), 109, 120.

²⁴Mrs. Lewis, in *Expository Times*, November, 1900.

10. MARY'S ALLEGED LATER HESITATION AS TO CHRIST.

It is said that if Mary knew that her Son was supernaturally conceived she would not have betrayed doubt in regard to his ministry, or anything but enthusiastic loyalty. It is worth while to look into these passages. There is an account of a tremendous crowd which pressed into the house (perhaps where his mother lived), even interfering with meals. "His friends"—not necessarily his mother—heard of this, and "went out to lay hold on him" on the ground that "he was beside himself" (Mark iii. 20, 21). We do not know who these friends were. Later his "mother and his brothers," from the outside of some house where he was teaching, called him. The folks inside told him of this. Then he gave that famous answer about those who do the will of God being his brother and sister and mother (iii. 31-35), or "those that hear the word of God and do it" (Luke viii. 19-21). There is not the slightest evidence that Mary ever lost her faith in her Son or shared the skepticism of his brothers, so far as they had any.²⁵ On the other hand, it is not necessary to suppose that she should keep the rapturous expectancy of an earlier time, or that the long humdrum of thirty weary years should not have checked her youthful spiritual exuberance, or that at any time she attained to a perfect knowledge of who her Son was. "It is psychologically more probable and historically more certain that she developed very gradually a right understanding and appreciation of the character and nature of her Divine Son. If we suppose her at or after his Birth to have spoken of its circumstances to any of her most intimate friends, we may be sure the result would be to close her lips and hush her into silence. As the years passed by doubt and questioning, wonder and

²⁵See Vassall-Phillips, "Conybeare on Mark iii. 21," London: Simpkin, 1910.

surmise, must have mingled themselves in her mind."²⁶ Was she entirely free from contemporary views of Messiah, and would not her son's words and works be sometimes perplexing to her also? And when Lobstein says that anything like this is "absolutely inconceivable" on the supposition of the Birth, he shows that he poorly understands human nature. But the wonderings of her devout soul, her nervous anxiety for the safety of Jesus, her reaction to the influence of his brothers—we cannot say that this argued unbelief of his Messiahship and divinity, so far as she understood them, not to speak of his Birth.

11. THE WITNESS OF JOHN.

How can one witness to what he does not mention? John's Gospel came out between (say) 85 and 95 and his purpose was to prove (1) his Lord's true humanity over against Cerinthus, (2) his real incarnation over against the same and the Gnostics, (3) his Messiahship over against the Jews, and (4) his Divinity and his being the alone Saviour and Lord of life over against opposers both Jews and Pagans. He presupposes a knowledge of the three Gospels, and therefore does not repeat their accounts. For this reason, and probably for this reason alone, he does not mention the Birth. But he takes it for granted, and his whole thought moves in a circle wherein a non-miraculous birth is impossible. The preëxistence of the Word in and with God was axiomatic with John; and that Word "became flesh" (i. 14), which is absurd if Jesus was born of an earthly father. In fact, so implicit was the belief of a heavenly origin of their Saviour on the part of Christians in the last section of the first century, so widely was it taken for granted, partly because of their reading of Matthew and Luke, partly because it was involved both logically and religiously in their general

²⁶ *Church Quarterly Review*, London, July, 1904, 391, 392.

thought of him, that John did not think it worth while to refute the Jew-Gnostic Cerinthus on this one matter. Cerinthus knew and John knew that he stood refuted as to Birth by the whole drift of the Gospel. Besides, every other man has to be born from above, through water and the Spirit. Otherwise he "cannot see the kingdom of God." But John's whole argument excludes Jesus, who is, then, not "born of the flesh" (though he "became flesh") as all other men are. The trend of John's Gospel witnesses to the Birth as truly as though he had literally gone into it after the fashion of his predecessors Matthew and Luke.²⁷

12. THE ALLEGED SILENCE OF PAUL.

Before I take up Paul I might say that the silence of Mark is easily explained. He wrote for Romans, who were men of deeds and wanted a short account of Christ's life as a doer, the actual things he did and said which showed that the Christian claim that he should be loved, followed, and worshiped is substantiated. "There is no room for anything so irrelevant to the main purpose of his (Mark's) scheme as a description of Christ's childhood or of the nature of his birth. So the silence which was still being maintained at the time he wrote was respected by our earliest evangelist and left to be broken in due course by other writers."²⁸ He does not even mention Joseph at all. Mark wrote at the prompting—perhaps dictation—of Peter, and the latter's speeches in Acts are in the same key as the Gospel—namely, of him who went about doing good, through whose Name those who believe on him should receive remission of sins, the Good News of salvation, the actual evidence of deeds of saving virtue for the bodies, minds, and souls of men. "The Virgin

²⁷Orr has excellent remarks here, "The Virgin Birth of Christ," 108-113.

²⁸Prestige, "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord," 67.

Birth was not the first subject upon which a missioner would pitch to speak of in the first century any more than in the twentieth; yet Mark's word would seem to have lain in giving the substance of the earliest mission preaching. Once again then it should occasion no more surprise that St. Mark is silent about the Virgin Birth than that St. Luke, who indisputably believed it, does not refer to it from the beginning of chapter iv. in his Gospel to the end of Acts.²⁹

Paul's silence is brought forward by those who oppose the Birth. Here again we have to remember his purpose. He was preaching first to Jews, then to pagans, and in neither case had he the slightest occasion to refer to it. In fact, to have done so would have shown a colossal lack of good taste and good sense, and Paul was preëminent in possessing both. When it was published, the Jews made malicious use of it, and the heathen did not need it to receive Christ, and when once they did receive him they would take it—when taught—as a matter of course. Then, why did Paul write his epistles? To meet some local exigency, doctrinal, ethical, practical, administrative, etc. Was there need anywhere in the Roman Empire where his letters went for a statement of the Birth, much more for an exposition and defense of it? Absolutely none. Did the Jewish Christians deny it? No. Did the Gentile Christians? No. But did not Paul defend the Divinity of Christ, and might he not therefore bring the Birth in? Well, I should hardly say "defend," for it was not denied by any of his opponents except the regular Jews, and he wrote no epistle for them. All sections of the Church took the Divinity of Christ for granted, for it was only much later that the Ebionites or a section of them denied it.³⁰ And accordingly Paul never sets out

²⁹Prestige, "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord," 68.

³⁰See Faulkner, "Modernism and the Christian Faith," 1921 (2d edition, 1922), 92-94.

deliberately to expound and defend the deity of our Lord, as he does the doctrines of justification by faith, the inclusion of the Gentiles, the resurrection of the body, and matters on which there were notorious differences of view; but in the midst of arguments not specially in this field of Christ's Person he makes numerous statements which go to show that that deity was one of the rocks of his faith. It was only much later when philosophical and apologetic needs arose that the question of the nature of Christ's divinity came up, and even then by no party in the Church was his Birth questioned.

Of course we do not know whether Paul heard the Birth discussed in Christian circles. But it is a very risky inference from our ignorance of what Christians were talking about to say that Paul did not know of that Birth. Even von Harnack admits that his friend, physician, and traveling companion Luke did know of it, and at the time when they were together.³¹ If so, Luke may have mentioned it to his friend. Then, Paul was inquisitive and a student, and I wish I might have overheard the questions he put to him, to Peter, and to others. His chief interest, however, as Gospel preacher was not the outward details of Christ's life, but his salvation for the world founded on his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and present activity through the Spirit. Even so, a universal negative as to Paul's epistles and the Birth is also risky. I would lay no stress on the omission of the father's part in Galatians iv. 4, but the Birth is suggested by the last Adam, the life-giving spirit of 1 Corinthians xv. 45 and the statement of verse 47 that the first man is of the earth, the second man is of heaven; or, if not suggested, is in harmony with the Birth, and no other natural interpretation of the verses can be seen. The Second Man marks the same critical beginning in human development as the

³¹Harnack, "Date of Acts," 144, 155.

first man did—each a new beginning. In Paul's mind Christ is not the natural outcome of his nation and country, but he is the creative start of a new race, in whom the whole race is gathered up. This would seem to be meaningless if Christ was not as divine in his origin as the first Adam was in Paul's mind, or—should we say?—infinitely more so. Besides, Paul traced universal sinfulness to our common possession of a human nature from Adam. But he held Christ as sinless. How could he do this without thinking of him as different from the rest of us in paternity or origin?³²

But not only the doctrines of regeneration, sinlessness, and the Second Adam, but other ideas fit into the Birth. "This is my Body that is broken for you. This is my Blood of the new covenant. Take, eat, drink." While Christ's body was entirely natural as a human body, there is a premonition in the Lord's Supper of a spiritual effectiveness of that body, of its religious worth for redemption, of its being the agency through faith in the Lord who bore it and our sins with it upon the Tree, which harmonizes with the thought of the more than human origin of that body offered to us by the Birth. While perfectly natural, was not his body also "unique, a new thing, mysterious, primitive, the well-head of a river of new life"?³³ Of course our Greek, Roman, and Anglican friends would carry this much farther, but independent of that we can all feel that the significance of Christ's body in Christianity—atonement, eucharist, resurrection, eternal life—fits in with the Birth: divine origin from the Spirit, human origin from the mother.

³²See Ince, "The Miraculous Conception of Christ," in *Expositor*, 5th series, volume I., 407, 408 (1895).

³³G. A. Chadwick, "The Virgin Birth," in the same, January, 1905, 57.

13. THE APOSTLES' CREED.

The Old Roman or the so-called Apostles' Creed which according to Kunze can be traced back in its essential elements to about 100,³⁴ and which in a fairly complete form goes back according to Harnack to about 140, Zahn 120, and Kattenbusch 100, has in its earliest forms the begetting by the Spirit and the Virgin Mary. I do not emphasize this, but it is a testimony to the primitive consciousness of Christians that the Birth was as truly a part of it as the crucifixion under Pilate, the forgiveness of sins, etc. The Apostles' Creed arose either as a handy statement of universally held Christian facts to be used in baptism, as is probable, or as such a statement to be used against Gnostic heretics, and in any case represents the belief of Christianity as such, not of any special division of it. The Creed, says von Harnack, "arose out of the missionary and catechetical function of the Church, and was originally simply a baptism symbol."³⁵ Besides, we have the direct testimony of Irenæus (about 175) that the Birth was universally held throughout the Empire.³⁶

14. SECOND-CENTURY WITNESSES.

We must not suppose that second-century Christian witnesses simply reechoed what they found in the rolls of what we call the New Testament. There is a difference in tone, atmosphere, trend, sometimes in direct teaching. We do not know how widely those rolls were copied, circulated, read. Historians have remarked on the legal-moral line taken by post-apostolic men, and of how few appropriated the daring evangelicalism of Paul.³⁷ These

³⁴Faulkner, "The Origin of the Apostles' Creed," in *Biblical Review*, N. Y., January, 1920, 103-116 and the references there given.

³⁵"Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntniss," 1892, 18.

³⁶Irenæus, "Contra Haer.," I. x. 1 (read whole chapter).

³⁷See Faulkner, "Crises in the Early Church," 1912, 146-149.

men were not slavishly dependent on the New Testament; but whether they were or not, they were at one with it as to the Birth. Let us take them in order of time.

(a) Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria, and in his journey to Rome, A.D. 110-117, wrote seven letters to Asia Minor Churches.

Hidden from the prince of this world (or age, *αἰώνος*) were the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing, likewise also the death of the Lord—three mysteries of open proclamation, such as were wrought in the silence of God.³⁸ . . . I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who bestowed such wisdom upon you; for I have perceived that ye are established in faith immovable, . . . firmly persuaded as to our Lord being truly of the race of David according to flesh, Son of God according to will and power of God, truly born from virgin, baptized by John, nailed up,³⁹ etc. (In Trallians 9 he speaks of Jesus as of the “race of David, son of Mary, truly born,” a use of words which seems to hint at the Birth.)

Ignatius was writing against the Docetists (*δοκέω*, to appear), who said that Christ’s flesh was in appearance only, and it would have been sufficient to refer to the reality of the birth, but he brings in also its supernatural character, as though that fact was taken for granted everywhere.

(b) Aristides of Athens wrote his “Apology” about 125 or 130. He says: “Christians trace their descent from the Lord Jesus Christ; now he is confessed by the Holy Spirit to be the Son of the Most High God, having come down from heaven for the salvation of men, and having been born of a holy virgin. . . . He took flesh, appeared to men.”⁴⁰

(c) Justin Martyr, who lived in Palestine, Asia Minor, and Rome, a philosopher and a well-informed Christian, wrote about 140-160, takes the Birth from a virgin for granted, on a level with the other facts confessed by all Christians about Christ. For instance: “He was born as

³⁸ Ignatius, “*Ad. Eph.*,” 19, ³⁹ “*Ad. Smyrn.*,” 1. ⁴⁰ “*Apology*,” 15.

a man of a Virgin, and was called Jesus, and was crucified and died, and rose again, and has gone up into heaven.”⁴¹

(d) Irenæus was born in Asia Minor, lived in Rome, and died as bishop in Gaul, was of wide acquaintance, and was thoroughly saturated with what we might call normal Christianity. His witness is important. He wrote about 175-190.

The Church, though scattered over the whole world to the ends of the earth, yet having received from the apostles and their disciples the faith [perhaps the following is a formal confession or chant of faith]

In one God the Father Almighty . . . and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets proclaimed the dispensations and the comings, and the birth from virgin, and the suffering, and the resurrection from dead, and the bodily assumption into the heavens of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord, and the coming (*παρονταν*) from the heavens in the glory of the Father.

Having received, as we said, this proclamation (or preaching) and this faith, the Church, though scattered over the whole world, guards it diligently, as inhabiting one house, and believes in accordance with these words as having one soul and the same heart; and with one voice preaches and teaches and hands on these things, as if possessing one mouth. For the languages of the world are unlike, but the force of the tradition (*παραδοσεως*) is one and the same.⁴²

(e) Tertullian was a vigorous, widely read lawyer-presbyter of Carthage, who, though an intense Christian, was an independent thinker. He wrote 197-215.

The Word by whom all things were made was sent by the Father into a Virgin, was born of her, God and man, Son of man, Son of God, and was called Jesus Christ.⁴³ He says the same in two other places.⁴⁴ He places the Birth among the indisputable facts of what he calls the “Rule of Faith, which is altogether one, firm and unalterable.”

⁴¹“1 Apology,” 46. See also 31, and “Dial. c. Tryph.,” 85.

⁴²“Contra Haerer.,” I. x. 1, 2. A like witness in III. iv. 1, 2.

⁴³“Adv. Praxeum.,” 2 (about year 208-209, Bonwetsch).

⁴⁴“De Praes. Haer.,” 133 (199).

(f) Clement, the philosophical, cultured dilettante of Alexandria, writing about 190-215, looks upon the Birth as on a level with the ordinary universally received facts of Christianity.⁴⁵

It is not necessary to continue these quotations further. They do not prove the Birth true. They only prove that every Christian of the second century who knew enough to write a book and had any occasion to refer to it took it to be true. Not that every Christian had such occasion. Hoben makes it a point against the Birth that so few do refer to it—"that uniform and notable silence" on the birth and early days of Jesus.⁴⁶ But the Apostolic Fathers and their successors wrote from impulses which had nothing whatever to do with the outstanding facts of Christ's life, not to speak of the manner of his birth. Therefore for those facts we are shut up almost entirely to the Gospels. The miracle is that we have as many references to the Birth as we have. Suppose there was something remarkable in the circumstances of your birth. How often would you or your friends have occasion to mention it even in conversation? Seldom. In published writings? Never. The cases in which Hoben thinks the Birth might have been brought in do not bear out his point. The fact is that whenever it came within the deliberate scope of the writer to speak of the Birth, whenever there was a fitting or inevitable call for it, he bears witness to it. That is all we can expect, almost more than we might hope for. The parable of the Prodigal Son has only a solitary witness. But it is enough.

15. DENIERS.

Were there deniers of the Birth? Yes. When? In the second and third centuries. Who were they? (1) Gnostics.

⁴⁵Clement of Alexandria, "*Stromata*," vi. 15 (A. N. F. ii. 509, col. 2).

⁴⁶"The Virgin Birth," 1903, 17.

(2) Jews and Pagans. (3) A section of the Ebionites. It is not necessary to linger over the second class. They invented horrible stories of Mary's adultery, a Roman soldier, and all that. No Jew or Pagan believes them now and in a brief sketch like this we must dismiss them. What about the Gnostics? They were a multi-colored sect (or sects) of the second century and later, having their roots in the first century, who held that the body or matter was opprobrious, with which the highest God could have nothing to do, and that only the lesser gods or emanations or æons could mix with it in proportion to their distance from God.⁴⁷ One of these Gnostics was Carpocrates in the second century, who claimed that the world was created not by God but by angels, that Jesus was a mere man, born of course naturally, on whom the power of God came down, and that he could thus be classed with Pythagoras and Plato. Cerinthus was another Gnostic of the second century who denied the Birth. He held that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, upon whom, at or after his baptism, the Christ came down to enable him to proclaim the unknown Father and do miracles, and that this Christ left him before his final sufferings.

What was the interest behind the speculations of Gnosticism? It was exactly the same as the modern "liberal" or rationalist, though for another purpose—to disconnect "Jesus" from "Christ." The more the Gnostic was Christian, or the more he shared the view of the Church as to Christ's divinity, the more he was concerned to separate Christ from matter; and as he knew that Christ really appeared under two aspects he divided these two by claiming that it was the man Jesus who had the body and the sufferings, and that the divine Christ was a heavenly æon who came down upon Jesus, dwelt in

⁴⁷For brief but comprehensive statement on Gnostics see "The Gnostic Crisis," in Faulkner, "Crises in the Early Church," 3^d ff.

him as a sort of foreign yet inspiring body, and left him before the final tragedy. I do not find that the Gnostics alleged in support of their views any historical tradition contrary to that in the Church. Their objections were philosophical or theological purely. Perhaps it was because the influence of history was too strong for the Ophite branch of the Gnostics to resist that they accepted the Birth.⁴⁸

We come now to the third class of deniers. The Ebionites were a section of the more reactionary Jewish Christians of the second century who denied the Birth. Some ancient authorities use the word roughly of all of this sect, and others distinguish between those of them who affirmed and those who denied. A thoroughly wide-awake and intelligent Christian observer, Justin Martyr, who wrote about 140-150, tells us about different kinds of Jewish Christians. He says there are those who believe in Christ and keep the institutions of Moses for themselves, yet do not force these upon other Christians; and there are those who are both believers and Jews, but would compel all Christians to be also Jews as to Moses's laws. With this second class Justin will have nothing to do.⁴⁹ Justin then goes on to speak of the ordinary Christian view as to the Messiahship, preëxistence, and Birth of Christ, but adds: "There are some of your [he is speaking to Trypho the Jew: the reading is not *our*, but *your*, as has been discovered in the primary Greek manuscript in the National Library, Paris] own race who confess that he is Christ, but maintain that he was born a man from men; with whom I do not agree, nor would the majority of those who have come to the same way of thinking as I, since we have been commanded by Christ himself to obey not human teachings but the things that were proclaimed

⁴⁸See the admirable discussion by Machen, "The Virgin Birth in the Second Century," in *Princeton Theological Review*, 1912, 542 ff.

⁴⁹Justin Martyr, "Dial. c. Tryph.," 47.

through the blessed prophets and taught through him."⁵⁰ There was a section among the extreme left of the Jewish Christians, therefore, who in the interest of a non-divine Messiah denied the Birth, though Justin himself received it as fundamental, apparently as much so as the Incarnation itself.⁵¹ But that emergence of naturalism is a little eddy on a far nook on the left shore of the wide stream of Christianity, and represented the latter as little as the No Button Mennonites represent the historic river of Protestantism.

16. ALLEGED PAGAN PARALLELS.

Critics who deny the Birth differ as to the origin of the belief in Christianity. Some claim a Jewish origin. So Lobstein. We have already seen that there was no psychological nor historical preparation in Judaism for such a belief, that Isaiah vii. 14 did not necessarily teach it, and that Matthew's reference to that passage is in keeping with his whole bearing to the Old Testament, always religiously, not always scientifically, exact. Cheyne suggests a Babylonian origin. But how could Babylonian myths get into the heads of early Christians? Some have referred to the Buddha legend. This Indian sage belonged to the fifth century B.C., and about 400 years later there came out in India a worthless story to the effect that his mother, who was married, was sleeping surrounded by her women. She dreams that a white elephant enters her side. This is the conception of her son the Buddha.⁵² But no one has explained how such a fable came into the possession of Christian circles in the primitive Church, nor how if it did it could give rise to the beautiful and almost splendid narratives of our Gospels. Besides, the

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Justin Martyr, "Dial. c. Tryph.," 48.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 84. In 85 he includes the Birth in a form of exorcism.

⁵²See Sweet, "Birth and Infancy of Jesus Christ," 1906, 162, with his references.

Buddha's mother had been living with her husband, and though the legend claims chastity it does not claim virginity. Then, there are no signs of later growth or accretions to our Birth story. They give the impression of naked simplicity. "The Infancy narratives stand among the most primitive portions of the New Testament, and exhibit fewer touches of the later ideas of the disciples than almost any others."⁵³ Thus their connection with the Buddha or other legends is unbelievable.

There are also the Greek and Roman stories of divine births. Rationalistic critics like Holtzmann, Schmiedel, and Usener look to these—"these heathen representations," says the first, "transferred to the world-conquering Son of God in the East." It is credulity gone mad. Notice: (1) The Greek myths have no historical basis, connection, atmosphere. The New Testament Birth is in a setting of details of time, place, relation, etc. (2) The former have no worthy religious bearing; the latter is a part of a divine history of salvation. (3) The former are accounts of actual sexual relations of lustful gods transformed into men (or more ignoble transformations) for the purpose. The heathen writers of the second and third centuries made the same use of these myths to discredit the Birth, but Origen was so impressed with its horrible unfairness that he thought such use an evidence of buffoonery, not of serious thinking.⁵⁴

More fitting is the reference to the birth-myths of Plato, Alexander, and Augustus. The idea is that the sacred writers, like the scholars of Pythagoras or Plato, wanted to enhance the divine genius of their Master by alleging a divine origin. But, as Nösgen says, critics ignore the fact that these heathen apotheoses, such as Speusippus's mention of Apollo's relation to Periktionē,

⁵³Sweet, 162, note. See Faulkner on Buddhism in *Methodist Review*, N. Y., May, 1915, 455 ff.

⁵⁴"*Contra Celsum*," i. 37.

the wife of Ariston (by whose wife, the myth said, the god begat Plato), proved how impossible it was to keep from distorting the nature of their gods into the picture of sensual humanness. And he adds that it is equally forgotten that with Jesus it has to do not with a philosophical genius, but with One who knew himself so certainly as Son of God that he would rather take the shame of the cross than deny Himself, and that his followers therefore were under no occasion to invent the story that he came down out of heaven to become the Son of Man (John iii. 13).⁵⁵ Besides, the fathers and mothers of great men like Plato were perfectly well known, and ascribing to them a divine parentage was only an "official" or polite flattery which deceived nobody. Further, in no case were the mothers virgins, or claimed to be. Augustus did everything in his power to promote the belief that Apollo was his father. "Observe the contrast between these fables unblushingly spread abroad by the persons immediately concerned and by interested flatterers and the stories in the Gospels. Where are the priests here to invent the story?"⁵⁶

What you can say is this: There was a disposition in paganism to invent stories of divine births for their heroes and gods, and that disposition witnesses to the true instinct of humanity to connect its highest gifts with the Higher Powers. Yes; but the Birth in the Gospels is at a vast remove from these stories, and stands in its own ample rights as historically, aesthetically, and religiously grounded, and as harmonizing—and it is the only explanation of the origin of Jesus that does—with the whole record of which it forms a part.

⁵⁵Nösgen, "Die Geburtsgeschichte Jesu Christi," in "Allgem. Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung," 1902, col. 1252.

⁵⁶Orr, "The Virgin Birth of Christ," 171.

17. THE REAL QUESTION.

I have come to the limits of space set for this discussion. Those who believe in that minimum of historical Christianity—say as embodied in the Apostles' Creed—confessed from the beginning till now by the whole Church of Christ will have little patience, perhaps, with this essay. They will say: Having accepted the Christianity of the New Testament, why are you concerned over one part of it? But here's the rub. The parts cohere. And the Birth is either denied or waved aside by thousands to-day who in the wake of German rationalism and rationalistic reconstruction of Christianity are out of sympathy with that supernaturalism which is the cohering element, that bond, crown, glory of our religion—the essential thing which makes it differ from all other religions: Jesus Christ Son of Man, Son of the Father, eternal Lord and Saviour. But some who shrink from going too far say, But we can have him by natural birth. Yes, you can have a religious genius, a saint, a lofty prophet of the Galilean hills. But if he preëxisted with the Father, as he claimed, if on account of that preëxistence he alone knew the Father, as he claimed, there was only one way in the nature of the case in which he could come in the flesh, and that is the way in which history says that he did come.⁵⁷ Deny that, and you are bound in time to work around to this conclusion: He was not divine in essence, except as we all are; and, The historical records are worthless, for if they are false as to his origin who can trust them as to other crucial matters? And that leads to the Real Question, the first and last question in Christianity: Who is Jesus Christ?

⁵⁷See further Faulkner, "The So-Called Virgin Birth," in "Modernism and the Christian Faith" (2d edition, 1922), 300 ff.

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